DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 340 134 EA 023 585

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TITLE Restructuring Education for the At-Risk Youth.
PUB DATE Nov 91
NOTE 21p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (Lexington, KY, November 13-15, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Educationally Disadvantaged; Elementary Secondary Education; *High Risk Students; *Organizational Change; School Effectiveness; *School Organization; *School Restructuring

ABSTRACT

Issues in restructuring education for meeting the needs of at-risk students are discussed in this paper. The six goals of restructuring are: (1) reduce the number of drop outs; (2) raise the level of achievement for all; (3) have business and education work together; (4) create schools which incorporate both social and educational services; (5) restructure the curriculum toward more realistic course offerings; and (6) improve teacher perceptions and attitudes toward at-risk students. Among the 11 recommendations for restructuring are: having every 4-year-old child enrolled in school for a full-day, enrollment of all 5-year olds in full-day kindergarten, teacher assistants for each first, second, and third grade teacher, etc. A model to address the problems of at-risk students is presented; it focuses on school administration/organization, teacher and student attitudes, and curriculum. A conclusion is that schools must adapt to the needs of students. (26 references) (LMI)

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# RESTRUCTURING EDUCATION FOR THE AT-RISK YOUTH

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Paper presented at the Mid-South Educational Research Association Meeting, Lexington, Kentucky

November, 1991

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# Restructuring Education for the At-Risk Youth

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"The more things change, the more they stay the same." This familiar saying exemplifies the impact of educational change over the past 20 years. As stated by Gandara (1989), the expectations of the modern school are still based on the characteristics of a student population of three decades ago. Present behaviors, values, and family resources that structure a child's development too often differ from the expectations of the traditional school. Children with the greatest educational needs are typically from groups who differ from the dominant culture (Levin, 1987). For true change, schools must target the students with the greatest needs, which are particularly those from minority, immigrant, non-English speaking, and economically disadvantaged populations.

At a time when societal structure has resulted in lessened parental influence and attention, "lock-step" educational procedures and "assembly line" techniques have resulted in an impersonalization of education, which has provided further alienation of already at-risk students. Comer (1988) noted that struggling students, alienated parents, and defensive school personnel foster a relationship of mutual distrust between the home and school, which impairs joint efforts to support the development of the child. For restructure, existing, not supposed,

relationships between parents and schools, students and teachers, and society and education must be examined.

Why Do We Need to Restructure?

Today's schools have not adapted to the changes of America's fast-paced society. During the industrial age, schools were modeled from industrial organization to provide students with the knowledge necessary for basic factory employment. When instruction, materials, and testing were streamlined for efficiency, the assembly line approach to education was born. In the "educational factory," the consideration of unique needs and individual strengths became secondary to the production of students equipped with skills suited for an industrial society.

As the bureaucracy grew, the need for conformity expanded. Rigid curriculum guides and district-wide testing standardized both instruction and learning. Today, no longer can workers rely on just the basic skills; jobs for the minimally prepared are few. Even entry-level employment requires new technological skills not delivered by the present educational system.

Although for years many have vocally advocated educational change to meet tomorrow's challenges, schools and our youth appear to be falling behind and problems seem to be escalating (O'Neil, 1990; Shanker, 1990). Today's children differ from those of years ago. Terms such as at-risk, high risk, dropout, and latch-key are used today to

describe an increasing number of students. Though students, parents, and environmental influences have changed, many teachers and administrators continue to view the responsibilities, objectives, and goals of the school as the same. These schools suited to the past produce some alarming statistics. In 1989, 700,000 high school students dropped out of school (Graham, 1989). The percentage ranges from 20% to 60%; the latter being from inner city schools serving poor, minority, and non-English speaking students. The data in The Nation's Report Card indicate that among 17-year-old high school students, only 4.9% operate at an advanced reading level involving synthesis and learning from written material; only 6.4% operate at an advanced math level involving multistep problem solving and algebra; and only 7.5% operate at a proficiency level involving the integration of specialized scientific information.

According to Graham (1989) half as many black men are in prison as in college. Teachers and administrators must actively tackle issues such as this to address the pervading atmosphere of hopelessness and anger that surrounds and demotivates many at-risk children.

Society has awarded the school the primary responsibility to provide the child with the feelings of belonging, adequacy, and self-affirmation that many at-risk students fail to receive from home. More than ever, schools must address needs that were once the responsibility of the family. Restructure must address the issue of who is truly

responsible for what. Also, the relationship between homes and schools must be closely examined in the effort to seek and support the true needs of the child.

What Is Restructuring?

According to Isenhart and Bechard (1987) in their report entitled "Dropout Prevention. The Education Commission of the States Survey of State Initiatives for Youth at Risk," restructured schools are the newest and the rarest single strategy presently used to keep students in school. They are based upon the visions of those who have been in the schools and have studied what works. To restructure schools, major changes, not minor, adjustments are necessary.

There must be an essential shifting of roles and behaviors with the outside community to create purposeful learning environments that consider the needs of every student. Teachers must take the initiative of creating these environments, as well as ascertaining needs and concerns.

The culture of the school must be altered. The organizational culture of a school is its shared expectations, meanings and common values (Sashkin & Huddle, 1986). These are reflected in the roles and responsibilities of the people served (Harvey & Crandall, 1988). Therefore, the school and its teachers must acquire

the knowledge of these values necessary to adapt to the cultural needs of its students.

Restructure must address the attitudes of teachers and principals toward the non-traditional student. As Combs (1988) suggests, the organizational structure based on earlier beliefs has failed to meet the needs of students possessing a different belief structure. The attitude that schools cannot nor should not encompass a variety of cultural beliefs is out-dated and not applicable to the present multicultural society.

The traditional curriculum has failed to serve the needs of all students and must be expanded to also serve the needs of the non-college bound students. All should acquire the basic skills necessary to become self-sufficient citizens. Schools must offer for at-risk youth practical courses suited to their particular needs, just as schools offer specific courses for college-bound students. Schools must no longer offer curricula as isolated bodies of knowledge without consideration of ability, need, and interest. Although it is fruitless to teach Shakespeare to one who cannot read, unfortunate situations such as this do exist and serve as evidence that many schools pursue unrealistic expectations. The system must adapt to the needs of at-risk students in an effort to keep them in schools where they can acquire the basic skills necessary to become productive in today's society (Mann, 1986).

In addition, the principal must take a pro-active, leadership role in restructuring. As Mann and Lawrence (1983) indicated in their list of variables which characterize instructionally effective schools, administrative characteristics and behavior were second only to teacher characteristics and behavior.

How Does Restructuring Work?

Important for the successful change of America's educational system is the adoption of a restructure goal. A 1986 report by the Carnegie Forum stated that our schools must graduate the vast majority of their students with achievement levels long thought possible for only the privileged few. As a goal, this statement provides purpose, direction, and the implied assertion that at-risk students can no longer be socially excepted from higher achievement levels. For restructure to be effective, schools must teach at-risk students to perform at acceptable levels of competency.

To accomplish this goal, specific objectives are important. One objective is to reduce the alarming number of high school students who drop out of school. Though various dropout prevention programs exist, there is no concerted national effort to address this issue. Such an effort must address issues such as peer pressure, substance abuse, pregnancy, child care, and the emotional needs of children in crisis. It was previously assumed that families,

communities, and churches would address these issues, but these non-school groups have not assumed this responsibility.

Raising the level of achievement for all is a second objective of restructure. As indicated above in The Nation's Report Card, schools are not successful in preparing enough high school students to handle higher order thinking skills and problem solving. These data reinforce the reality of the present system's failure. Schools must demonstrate that all children can learn regardless of their socio-economic levels.

A third goal is that business and education must work closely together in a restructured educational system (Lopez, 1989). In addition, the duties and responsibilities of each must be clarified. At present, businesses and corporations seek workers who understand complicated instructions, are computer literate, and possess the ability to read and analyze data. Because of the ill-equipped labor force, industry spends billions of dollars in remediation and employment retraining. To avoid a waste of time and capital, industry and education must work within a framework to avoid a duplication of services. Although, much can be achieved through the combined efforts of business and education, schools must still be primarily responsible for providing students with the fundamental skills for employment in today's society.

Successful restructure must include the creation of schools which incorporate both social and educational services. Though an increasing number of girls become teenage mothers, very few educational systems have addressed the needs of teenage mothers in school. Many at-risk students bring to school problems concerning alcohol abuse, drug abuse, child abuse, and depression. Crippled by a lack of resources and inundated with various other responsibilities, guidance counselors alone cannot address the myriad problems. The expectation that students take advantage of available community social services has proved unrealistic; therefore, outside services should be brought inside the schools. Opportunities exist for the integration of day care, prenatal care, sex education, and substance abuse education within the broadened boundaries of a restructured educational system.

A fifth goal is the restructure of curricula toward more realistic course offerings. Present requirements are not suitable for all, as evidenced by the at-risk youth who drop out of school or graduate ill-prepared for employment. Restructure must address the question of what students actually need to know. Due to differing needs, goals, interests, and abilities, imposed rigid curriculum standards represent an unrealistic view of the purpose and necessity of learning. At present, students who fail to acknowledge or accept the school's traditional values are not presented opportunities to pursue the knowledge that relates to their

perceived realities. Restructured schools must recognize the differences in cultures, needs, abilities, and interests and offer a variety of courses and programs designed for at-risk youth. With this accomplishment, each student will be given the opportunity to receive an education based on knowledge the student considers useful, relevant, and important.

Improvement of teacher perceptions and attitudes toward the at-risk student is a sixth goal of restructure. Teachers, particularly of at-risk students, find themselves unable to successfully fulfil expected teaching duties when pressured by unrealistic requirements, inflexible curricula, and rigid standards. This situation breeds frustration and fosters the dangerous belief that some children just cannot learn and are best left alone. Restructure should allow teachers the autonomy and flexibility needed to teach the individual student. The adoption of student-based goals, guides, curricula, and time lines would nurture respect and mutual trust. Teachers and students should work together without pressure to produce positive learning experiences that promote both intellectual and emotional growth.

If a student is consistently discouraged by receiving signals from school concerning academic inadequacies and finds little or no interest or caring from teachers, then it is not unreasonable to expect that student to become alienated and want to leave the school environment. The creation of student-based schools that focus on problem

anticipation and solution initiation would be sensitive to student needs.

The goal of restructure is attainable with effort, capital, and more importantly, a discarding of past beliefs and ideas that have proved untrue. Dropout prevention and improved achievement is important to the program's success. The union of business and education can prepare students for today's world. Social services can be brought within the boundaries of education to reach youth effectively. Curricula which include a variety of courses can meet the various needs of students. In addition, lessened teacher pressure and frustration can improve educator attitudes and perceptions toward at-risk youth and their learning. Important to the achievement of these objectives is the belief that they would work, would broaden school effectiveness, and would achieve the student-focus lacking in education today.

Where Do We Begin?

The educational factory approach with its standardization of materials, instruction, and curricula, led to the misguided attempt to standardize teachers and students in a rapidly changing society. This rigidity contributed to the educational factory's downfall. With present research and information, it is possible to rebuild the system to produce educational environments which address the needs of the present society and students of today. It

is important to avoid simplistic "cookie cutter" solutions to complicated problems. Also important is the recognition of student, teacher, and community individuality. Therefore, each school system must assess its own population and base a restructure program upon its particular students, needs, and problems. Existing recommendations must be reviewed and evaluated by each local system. With a new commitment, a new attitude, and a new direction, schools can educate the majority of students to an achievement level once attained by a privileged few. Because the education of children affects society as a whole, all must work together to create, organize, and implement effective programs of school restructure.

The following recommendations for restructure should be reviewed by individual schools on the basis of student and community needs (Gastright, 1988). These recommendations are best not implemented singly, but as part of a comprehensive individualized restructure program. For success, individual systems must avoid inflexibility and be free to be innovative and creative.

1. The first step in restructure is to commit to the process. In 1987 Hahn, Danzberger, and Lefkowitz, following a thorough review of the literature of America's dropouts, concluded that enough was known to formulate a comprehensive plan for policy makers and grant makers to follow in an effort to improve prospects for successful high school

completion for America's at-risk children and youth.

2. In association with social and welfare agencies in the community, pre-natal care should be provided to all pregnant teenage girls. Schooling should be provided until the time of delivery and child care would be provided upon the mother's return to school. In addition, agencies in the school would offer other services to students to address additional problems.
3. Each four-year-old child would be enrolled in a day care/school for a full day (Bereiter, 1970). Enrollments may include Head Start programs, private day care, or school supported programs. Transportation would be provided for each child in a school supported program. Schools must pioneer efforts positively to influence early childhood environments and provide effective experiences for pre-k youth, particularly for those who would not ordinarily acquire such experiences (Jones, 1988).
4. Each five-year-old would be enrolled in a full day kindergarten program at state or local expense with transportation provided for each student.
5. Transitional classes would be established in each elementary school to accommodate students who are not socially or academically ready for promotion to the next level. Classes would be established

between kindergarten and grade one; grades one and two; and grades two and three. The need for transitional classes in the primary school is of primary importance when one considers that being retained one grade increases the risk of dropping out later by 40-50%, and failing two grades increases one's chances of dropping out by 90% (Bachman, et al, 1971).

6. Over a three-to-five-year period, teacher assistants should be added to each first, second, and third grade classroom. These personnel would be required to possess minimally a high school diploma and would work cooperatively with the classroom teacher in the instruction of children.
7. Traditional junior highs (grades 7-8) would be replaced by middle schools facilitating grades 6 through 8. The concept (Wells, 1989) would be implemented by principals and faculty oriented to the middle school concept, philosophy, and conduct through middle school orientation workshops.
8. In-school suspension programs staffed with school-home coordinators, counselors, and a psychologist would be established in all middle and high schools.
9. Middle and high schools would be staffed to support programs in the fine arts and in physical education. Each student's program would be

comprehensive, based on the student's cultural background, and tailored to his/her needs.

10. All high school students would have the opportunity to participate in both academic and vocational-technical programs. Facilities would be made available for students seeking vocational and technical courses.
11. Schools and faculty would emphasize sensitivity, flexibility, and growth in the creation of student-based schools willing to adjust quickly to the needs of students.

These restructure recommendations effectively promote change, but alone do not constitute a comprehensive plan. They provide only the beginning. Each comprehensive restructure plan containing individualized objectives should be based on an analysis and needs assessment of the local system and on concepts gained from a review of related literature. Hahn, Danzberger, and Lefkowitz (1987) recommended individualized educational approaches, remediation, social services, skill development and employment which incorporates sustained collaboration between the nonprofit and private sectors, government, and public education with input from youth and their parents.

According to Wehlage, Rutter, and Turnbaugh (1987), "schools are not likely to help at-risk students unless they can change fundamental school-student interactions" (p.71),

and they recommend a model program to address the problem of at-risk students. The model includes the following four areas:

1. Administration and organization of the school,
2. Teacher attitudes,
3. Student attitudes, and
4. Curriculum.

It is essential that teachers believe at-risk students deserve learning opportunities, and are not only willing, but anxious to provide those opportunities. It is imperative that they exhibit care, concern, and a willingness to address those problems that affect the whole child.

The model also promotes a vital change in the student attitude which incorporates renewed commitment toward work expectations and acceptable standards of behavior. A new family-type atmosphere in schools coupled with new teacher attitudes should help accomplish this goal, but students must acknowledge behavioral consequences and learn to assume responsibility for their lives. Changes in student attitude will not occur quickly, but can be achieved with renewed commitment and positive school, community, and family environments.

The model assumes that curriculum and teaching must be substantially different from that which is ordinarily found in the typical high school. Individualization, clear objectives, prompt feedback, concrete evidence of progress,

and an active role for students are some of the dominant features of the model. Curricula must range from remedial to advanced and offer additional studies such as sex education, parenting, health care and nutrition, and community and social services.

An analysis of present society in regard to at-risk youth provides evidence that many students receive curricula not suited to their needs. Lotto (1982) stated that the structure and the content of the curriculum must be changed to meet the needs of the at-risk student. McDill, Natriello, and Pallas (1986) state the following:

> Specifically, an individualized curriculum and instructional approach are crucial because psychologically disengaged students such as potential dropouts have substantial deficits in aptitudes and achievement. Individualized learning approaches with course content and mode and pace of presentation tailored to the individual student's aptitude and interests (to the extent possible) are of major importance in order to prevent the sense of academic failure and low self-esteem characteristic of school delinquents, truants, and dropouts; feelings that will be even more pronounced as standards are raised (p.148).

In his article,"Educational Changes for the 1990's," Cage (1984) stated that "In the decade ahead, public

education will be asked to confront not only declining numbers, but a student body that is culturally more diverse, where the willingness to be melted is less present, and the inclinations to be unique and to maintain identity will be more persistent. Schools must find ways to become more effective institutions for those who, in large numbers, now reject what is offered" (p.123). Students no longer adapt to the needs of the school; today, schools must adapt to the needs of its students. Change and flexibility are advocated for the development of a restructured educational system where students of today are prepared for the needs of tomorrow.

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